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RECENT TRENDS IN CONSUMER EDUCATION

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Interest in consumer education is coming from many quarters:

Home-economics and social-science courses in high schools, colleges, and in adult education.

Women's clubs: General Federation of Women's clubs has been putting out pamphlets.

Professional Associations e.g.: American Home Economics Association, American Association of University Women study outlines, pamphlets of various kinds, American Medical Association.

Current magazines are having a good deal to say, some good, some very poor.

Special publications whose whole or main effort goes to consumer education e.g.:

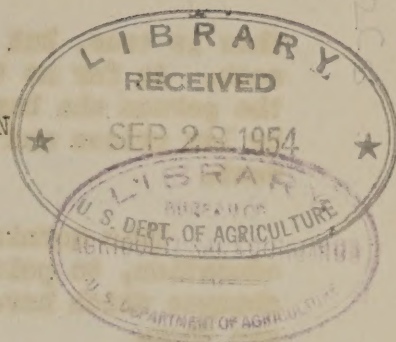
Consumer's Research.  
Consumers' Union.  
National Consumer Union.  
Consumers' Digest.

Consumer Advisory Board of the N. R. A. officially representing the consumer in the making of codes. Publicity brought some benefits. Then the National Emergency Council started the County Consumers' Councils. These in some places were quite influential. Now consumer's projects in the U. S. Bureau of Labor likely to be confused with labor interests.

Other organizations representing special interests are trying their hand at consumer education e.g.: U. S. Dept. of Agriculture through the Consumers' Guide.

In this so-called education program there has been a good deal of confusion as to who the consumer is. Some say that all people are consumers.

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This is true, but there is a special consumer interest that must be clearly seen. As far as the market is concerned the consumer is the final buyer, the person who buys for use and not for resale. The consumer is benefited by low prices and high quality, by devices that help them get what they want.

This morning I want to talk to you about certain phases of consumer education, to point out where the emphasis has fallen in the past, and changes which have been occurring and some important present needs as I see them.

Consumer education has many different phases. Most basis is that designed to affect choice making. Education affects choices insofar as it influences (1) ends in life that people consider to be most important, and (2) ideas concerning the usefulness of various goods in meeting these ends. Of the first of these, Wicksteed says:

The man who can make his fellows desire more worthily and wisely is doubtless performing a higher task than one who enables them more amply to satisfy whatever desires which they have. 1/

People see life in terms of certain ends to be achieved, a certain way of living, a healthy vigorous body, palatable appetizing food, an attractive comfortable home, smart clothing, certain types of recreation, of education. The hours of the day and the money in one's purse are limited. Some things are wanted more than others. Choices are made according to scales of preferences. These scales are the result of a multitude of forces: Family tradition, local customs and convention, individual taste, education, income. Education may be deliberately planned to develop in people a fuller understanding of human development, of ends to seek, means of self-expression, latent talents, possible joys in life. Consumers may be left to discover for themselves the merits of various goods in meeting certain needs or an educational program may be planned to inform or to help people discover what goods are best.

Education designed to improve and elevate choices is far from simple. Science lights the path only a very short way, as for example in recognizing the relation of food to health; in appraising the importance of lighting, ventilation, and sanitation of housing; in indicating undesirable fit of clothing. Beyond such matters as these the answer to what is best, whether "this" is better than "that", is not so clear cut. Choice making must be taught through appreciation, not through dogmatic rules. The best teacher is one who is tolerant, who has lived fully, who in imagination at least has entered into many situations. A study of standards of living has an important contribution to make to choice making. In this way, other possible ways of living are visualized. People see themselves more clearly and are thus enabled to break away from the tyranny of petty customs and convention, to give freer play to their imaginations, to glimpse new possibilities in living. The history of all people, and descriptions of present

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1/ The Common Sense of Political Economy, vol. I, p. 123.



modes of living in India, China, Denmark, Sweden, and other foreign countries, as well as those in different parts of the United States, develop broader horizons and enrich choices.

Attention to the choice making phase of consumer education is increasing. One important change has, in many places, been receiving special attention. People have been rapidly shifting from country to city, new modes of recreation have appeared, the length of the working day has tended to increase, especially that of housekeeping women. As a result of this set of changes, much is being heard of education for leisure. It has been given a formal place on many educational programs. The essence of education for leisure is choice making, the teaching of new values. But quite apart from leisure there are other reasons why education in choice making is important. Various scientific discoveries have made us more certain than ever before that many customary choices of people are far from the best. Knowledge brings benefits only when it finds expression in the lives of people. New goods are constantly appearing on the market. People need help in evaluating these, knowing their possible uses, fitting them into their scales of preference.

Furthermore, education in basic choice making is needed in order to offset the effect of modern advertising. Consciously, deliberately, with steadily increasing scope, advertisers have set out to change consumer preferences. They call it consumer education, yet it lacks the characteristics of true education. Each advertiser tries to magnify the importance of his goods. Glibly the scientist is quoted, not in the interests of enlightening possible users, but to aggrandize a particular brand or product far beyond its relative worth. Never before has the market system on such a wide scale, by such insidious methods, attempted to shape choices. True, the exaggeration of one advertiser tends to offset that of another. But there is a total effect which leaves choices different than it would be without advertising.

Many people point to the waste of consumer purchasing power occurring if high quality food is purchased when a poorer, less expensive quality would serve "the same purpose." They maintain, for example, that it is sheer waste to buy grade "A" or "B" canned peas for soup, or tender cuts of meat for stewing and braising, or to pay a special price for white or brown shelled eggs because of imaginary quality differences. Waste occurs if expensive equipment, well rigged out with gadgets, is purchased when simple tools would do "equally well", if products are purchased ready-made when they could readily be prepared by the members of the family out of materials necessitating a much smaller money outlay. Criticisms of this sort are, of course, justified only if the lower priced product is an acceptable substitute. If willingness to pay for the higher price is caused solely by imaginary differences in quality, if behavior would have been different if all important facts about the product and possible substitutes had been known. Emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that so-called high quality or first grade does not mean that it is the best quality for every purpose.



A second phase of consumer education takes for granted the desire for certain goods and services and sets out to help consumers get these with the minimum of time and effort. Several questions arise to perplex consumers, e.g., Where to buy? When to buy? What quantities to buy? Whether to pay cash or get credit? If credit is to be used, where is the best place to secure it? How to recognize quality?

There are no outright answers to these questions. Hence, the educator must help people to examine the factors which influence decisions, to get acquainted with the market, the various services offered, the price difference which exists from place to place and time to time, common deceptions as to price, charges for services, quality.

At the present time the most perplexing of all buying problems is that of recognizing quality, finding the quality best for a particular use and best in view of price. It is in this problem that much of the recent consumer education has concentrated. Various means of recognizing quality are available: Inspection of the goods, home testing, price, brands, informative labeling. More than ever before, consumers are being told about the earmarks of a good product, what to look for; they are being informed about simple tests which can be made. In a few cases, they are getting advice as to relative quality of products by brand names; they are being instructed on the meaning of information being given. Good buymanship is not just a matter of knowing certain facts; it is a matter of techniques and procedures; preparation before setting out to shop or buy and procedure in the store. Consequently, a program of consumer education includes an analysis of plans for the buying of different goods, information to be secured before going to shop, check lists to use so that no important features are overlooked.

Since buying is an ever-present problem and practical questions arise from day to day, considerable attention is given to sources of information that can be used. To be satisfactory, they must be readily accessible, easily understood and reliable as a guide.

A third phase of consumer education is concerned with the consumer-retailer relationship: with how her shopping and buying practices affect cost, how they affect the kind of service she gets, how to cooperate with the retailer in order to get the particular kind of goods she wants and the information concerning them.

Consumer education programs, in many cases, include also a study of ways of using and caring for goods in order to get maximum returns.

Consumers are interested in getting their money's worth in the market. A very short study of the market is usually sufficient to reveal fully that the system is far from perfect. A fifth phase of consumer education is concerned with the functioning of the present system of production and marketing, its basic drives, conflicts of interest, automatic control which competition affords, the factors which now interfere with competition, what are fair prices, forces at work making prices higher than necessary and quality, in some instances, poorer. Consumers should be acquainted with



ways in which the market might be improved, and proposed changes which would tend to make it even more inferior. They need to be made acquainted with the possibilities of consumer cooperatives, the advantages which would come from more informative labeling, why it has not been increasing more rapidly, the adulteration of goods, the deception and fraud which occurs in advertising, labeling and personal salesmanship, why present agencies supposedly checking such things are not more effective. Consumers everywhere should be acquainted with the limited protection they get from the Federal Trade Commission activities, the limitations of the Pure Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. They should know how, one by one, certain proposed provisions of this act have been modified or dropped because they would tend to interfere with the profits of some manufacturer or advertiser who benefits from exploiting consumer ignorance.

On the other side, they should be acquainted with how certain measures tend to raise prices, measures which are passed by legislators to protect the interests of certain limited groups. Many States now have chain-store taxes. In passing these, consumer interests were largely ignored. The effect of the Robinson-Patman Act and resale price maintenance laws need to be followed carefully and their effect on consumer interests weighed.

Attention in consumer education has tended to emphasize some of these more than others. Emphasis has tended to fall on those phases where: (1) Consumers in general are especially conscious of the need for certain information, (2) benefits from increased knowledge are likely to accrue immediately rather than in some distant future, (3) benefit come from individual rather than group action, (4) the information given is relatively simple involving no high degree of mental effort, or special training, (5) people adequately trained and qualified are available for carrying on the program.

The most neglected phase of consumer education is that which relates to the functioning of the economic system. The reasons for this neglect are many. In the first place, day to day buying and using of goods is the immediate problem. Thus, instruction in how to get more satisfactory quality, where and when prices are low, how to make the most of products purchased, will practically always find an eager audience, attentive to the facts, ready, individually, to go out and test at once the advice given. The advantage to them is obvious and direct. Benefits from a study of the functioning of the economic system are very long-run. Furthermore, the individual by himself can do little. Control must come through group action which must wait on general and widespread interest. In addition, there is more opposition from vested interests to this type of education. Educators may be warned that their instruction is being frowned upon by members of the school board, that complaints are being received from prominent citizens.

An even greater handicap arises from the fact that the cause and effect relationships are very complex. The truth that is the action likely to bring the effect desired, is not always readily apparent. Because of this complexity, more highly trained teachers are necessary, and



at the present time competent teachers in this field are scarce. In addition, consumers from time to time are likely to be deluged with conflicting analyses and conclusions on various controversial issues in which their interests are at stake. They may come to feel that the whole is a matter of opinion, that there is no truth to be had, or they may conclude that one party is lying. The silver-tongued orator rather than the teacher is the one most likely to get a hearing.

In spite of the complexity of the economic system, there are some simple things which, if securely grasped, will help people to orientate themselves to various issues which arise, will prevent their being swept away by propaganda of small groups trying to arouse public sentiment in their favor. For example, what could be more simple, more obvious, than the fact that the scale of living in the country can only be raised by increasing production. Yet, in the discussion of many issues, this fact has been frequently totally ignored in the past few years. Shorter hours for all workers, few factories busy, fertile land lying idle, will never result in society as a whole being better fed, better clothed, better housed, having all the comforts and luxuries which might be enjoyed, although the restrictions may bring benefits to some groups. Consumers at the present time are the prey of special groups, each out for their own interests. As a result, there are many deliberately created barriers which prevent the full utilization of our productive power. One fact should be clear and uppermost in consumer minds. Anything that decreases efficiency, that prevents in any way the full utilization of productive resources, to that extent raises prices and lowers the scale of living of consumers as a whole.

A recognition of the difference between the narrow private and broad public interest is essential. Private interests are concerned with a higher and higher income, and more and more power for particular individuals or groups. Public interests are concerned with maximum real income and making fullest use of productive resources. When it is a question of individual or special groups versus the consumer, consumer interests should be paramount.

Margaret G. Reid.



DISCUSSION OF TOPIC  
RECENT TRENDS IN CONSUMER EDUCATION

Led by Iva Brandt,  
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Some agencies other than those Dr. Reid suggested, working in the field of textiles and clothing.

- (1) The Advisory Committee on Ultimate Consumer Goods, of the American Standards Committee, has recently appointed a subcommittee that will work entirely in the textiles and clothing field for the protection and education of the consumer. The work to be done is in connection with standardization for hosiery, color fastness, children's and men's work shoes, bedding, etc.
- (2) Committee D-13 of the American Society for Testing Materials has also recently appointed a subcommittee, A-6, on household and garment fabrics whose "chief interest will lie in those materials which enter so largely into the construction of ultimate consumer goods."
- (3) National Retail Dry Goods Association, at their January meeting appointed a Consumer Relation Committee "to work out ways and means to provide consumers with greater protection against false advertising and bad merchandising methods and to establish standards for consumers' needs." As outlined by Harold Brightman, vice-president and general merchandise manager, of the Bamberger Department Store at Newark, N. J., and also chairman of the Advisory Committee on Ultimate Consumer Goods of the A.S.A., this Consumers' Relations committee will work along the following lines:
  1. Intelligent standards of sizes.
  2. Stress correct terminology.
  3. Wearing qualities that may be expected.
  4. Honest advertising.
  5. Informative honest labeling.
  6. Fully informed salespeople.

The work of these three committees from these three organizations should be of special interest and can be followed through such magazines as National Consumers' News, 509 Fifth Avenue, New York; Journal of Home Economics; Women's Wear, etc.

This recent action of the National Retail Dry Goods Association is most gratifying and encouraging. With the retailer fully convinced that the consumer should be given honest, informative labeling and truthful advertising, the consumer must not fail to be interested in receiving and insist on getting just such information; a very important point to stress in our work in consumer education.



